

CHICAGO
DAILY NEWS

MAR 13 1964

MARGUERITE HIGGINS

Students Spoiling for Fight, More Canal Violence Likely

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PANAMA CITY, Panama

There is a better than even chance of more ugly violence here this spring and summer, irrespective of whether the United States and Panama agree on "adjustments" on the canal treaty of 1903.

This is the conclusion prevailing among veteran diplomats, Panamanian community leaders, zone officials and Castroite leaders interviewed here during the last week.

The likelihood of violence stems from the fact that the 6,000 university students, led by a handful of Castroites, are spoiling for a fight—any kind of a fight—whereas the present Chiari government considers it politically inexpedient to try to control them—even when the politically excused rowdiness is directed at nations other than the United States.

For instance, about 10 days ago, the newly arrived British ambassador and his wife woke up to find political posters pasted or nailed to trees in their otherwise neatly manicured garden. Posters were in support of the Panamanian political candidates in the forthcoming May elections who are the most violently opposed to the 1903 canal treaty for which, naturally, the British government has no responsibility.

In any case, the British ambassador asked his head gardener to remove the anti-treaty and anti-American posters forthwith. At this point, a truckload of "students" materialized, surged onto the British Embassy grounds, shouted that "Panama is sovereign" and that the British ambassador had no right to take down the posters raised in "Sovereign Panama" (but in embassy territory). The students enforced their argument by hurling stones and abuse at the gardener and at the embassy.

But when the British ambassador telephoned Panamanian foreign minister Solis with an urgent request for assistance and protection, the foreign minister replied, in effect, that the prudent course would be to let the students have their way for the time being.

A VISIT to student headquarters at Panama University revealed the same heady—and therefore dangerous—exhilaration at world attention that prevailed among the riot-prone Japanese students in their 1960 heyday of anti-American and anti-Eisenhower violence which only ended after the Japanese government finally ordered police to bring things under control.

At Panama University the bulletin board at student headquarters was jammed with letters and telegrams from all over the Communist world congratulating them for their "heroism" during the January riots which they spearheaded. The longest telegram was from Red China and it occupied the most prominent place on the blackboard.

In our interview, Victor Avila, the undisputed leader of the left wingers who—despite his own bland denials—is reported by the Panamanian minister of education to have made a pilgrimage to Cuba, spoke civilly and calmly enough even though outside, in the hall, excited students shouted (in Spanish) "A reactionary gringo is in there."

Crowds gathered and this made my interpreter nervous, because he remembered seeing some of these students in January with Molotov cocktails in their hands. But at this point I said smilingly to an English-speaking student, "How do you know I am a reactionary gringo? How do you know I am not a secret Castroite agent? Castro admires blonds, you know."

And this seemed to end the reactionary gringo gambit.

ACCORDING to Avila, the United States "must agree to turn over the canal in 10 years" or there will be much trouble. This is, of course, an impossible demand. For whatever "adjustments" the United States is ready to make on the canal, it is certain that Washington is not ready under present circumstances of the cold war and Castro pressures to accept a 10-year deadline as a substitute for the treaty clause granting it control of the Canal "in perpetuity."

But the reality is that in Panama as in Venezuela, where there is no quarrel with the United States, trouble serves Castroite purposes and the present permissive attitude of the Chiari government is an almost irresistible temptation for the student troublemakers.

So far, the Chiari government has given no sign of recognizing the fact that the student violence can create a political backfire.

In Panama City storekeepers are beginning to talk critically of the damage inflicted by the rioters on Panamanian-owned property. The grumbling is such that some of the opposition candidates have been emboldened to criticize the government for failure to maintain order. Although presidential elections are in May, which is also when university students return from vacation, the new leader of Panama will not take office until October.

"We are not prepared to wait," said student leader Avila, adding ominously, "and next time we will have worldwide support."